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ABSTRACT

An analysis of Hebrew topicalization looks at the normal or unmarked function of topicalization in narrative discourse and considers the additional contextual effects that marked or apparently redundant instances of topicalization are intended to achieve. Focus is on the fronting of elements in sentences with topic-comment articulation. It is argued that while earlier characterization of topicalization as bidirectional is appropriate, it is also the case that topicalization provides the basis for linking the communication to its context. Topicalization and discontinuities in storyline are then considered. A proposal that all topicalized sentences in Hebrew are backgrounded is then refuted, and examples of marked topicalization (i.e., passages in which there is no evidence of a discontinuity in the story yet topicalization occurs) are examined. It is concluded that the intended effect of marked topicalization is to highlight a key event to follow. Thirteen notes and a 19-item bibliography are included. (MSE)

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UNMARKED AND MARKED INSTANCES OF TOPICALIZATION IN HEBREW[1]

Stephen H. Levinsohn

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1 Introduction

My aims in this paper are twofold: first, to spell out the normal or UNMARKED function of topicalization (as defined below) in narrative discourse; and second, to consider what Sperber & Wilson call the "additional contextual effects" (1986:196) that MARKED or apparently redundant instances of topicalization are intended to achieve in Hebrew.

In sect. 2, I argue in favour of Beneš 1962 characterization of topicalization as bidirectional. It not only serves "as point of departure for the communication", but also provides the basis for linking the communication to its context. I then review my 1987 work on the relation between topicalization and what Givón (1983:8) calls "discontinuities" (cf. also Lambdin 1971:62): discontinuities in the flow of the story, in the spatio-temporal setting or in the cast of participants (sect. 3). In sect. 4, I consider why topicalization is often associated with backgrounding, but argue that Longacre (1989) is wrong in treating ALL topicalized sentences in Hebrew as backgrounded. Finally, in sect. 5, I examine examples of marked topicalization, i.e. passages in which there is no evidence of a discontinuity in the story yet topicalization occurs, and claim that the intended effect of marked topicalization is to highlight a key event which is to follow.

I first need to define the SCOPE of this paper. I am concentrating on the fronting of elements in sentences with what Andrews (1985:77ff) calls "topic - comment articulation". Thus, I am concerned with sentences like (1):[2]

(1) (8:14) &-in-month the-second... 3SF-was-dry the-earth.
(And in the second month...[3] the earth [TOPIC] was dry [COMMENT].)

I am NOT discussing sentences with what Andrews calls "focus -

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presupposition articulation". In such sentences, an element is fronted for focus, as in (2):[4]

(2) "The SECOND month [FOCUS] was when the earth dried up [PRESUPPOSITION]."

Returning, then, to sentence (1), Halliday (1970:161) would divide this sentence into two functional parts: a sentence topic "in the second month", and a comment "the earth was dry".[5] I do not follow Halliday's analysis. Rather, I consider that a comment ("was dry") is being made about the sentence topic "the earth" and that the sentence topic is preceded by the "topicalized" (Andrews 1985:79) element "in the second month". In Hebrew, this phrase precedes the verb.

Thus, I divide sentence (1) functionally as shown in (1'):[6]

(1') In the second month / the earth / was dry.
TOPICALIZED ELEMENT / SENTENCE TOPIC / COMMENT

2 Beneš' characterization of topicalization as bidirectional

Discussions of the function of topicalized elements tend to focus on what follows it in a discourse. Thus, Chafe (1976:50) says that a preposed element "sets a spatial, temporal or individual domain within which the main predication holds."

Recently, however, a number of linguists have recognized that topicalized elements are as much backward-looking as forward-looking (e.g. Prince 1982). This insight should probably be credited to Beneš. Back in 1962, he wrote that what he called the BASIS, "serving as a point of departure for the communication, is directly linked to the context" (Garvin's translation; 1963:508).

A number of writers have also observed that topicalized elements (bases) are "either already evoked in the discourse or else in a... set relation to something already evoked in or inferrable from the discourse" (Andrews 1985:78). This set relation is called "switch" by Andrews, and "replacement" by myself (1980:3; 1987:180).

I now illustrate how topicalized elements in Hebrew indicate the basis for relating what follows to the context. In narrative, such bases are most commonly (in Chafe's words) "spatial, temporal or individual". In the Hebrew of Genesis, spatial bases are rare,[7] temporal bases more common, and "individual" bases very common in narrative.

Passage (3) illustrates two TEMPORAL bases (one with and one without an introductory wayhi [&-3S-was] "and it happened; 8:13a,14"). In both cases, the new temporal setting REPLACES the previous one (whether stated or implied). In Andrews' words, there is a SWITCH relation between the previous temporal setting and the new one. In

Beneš terms, the BASIS for linking the new sentence to the context is temporal.

(3) (8:12) (Noah waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.)

(13a) &-3S-was ON-FIRST &-SIX HUNDRED YEAR ON-FIRST ON-FIRST TO-MONTH 3P-dried-up the-waters from-on the-earth

(13b) &-3S-removed Noah covering-of the-ark

(13c) &-3S-looked &-see 3P-were-dry surfaces-of the-ground.

(14) &-ON-MONTH THE-SECOND... 3SF-was-dry the earth.

(And it happened, by the first day of the first month of Noah's 601st. year, that the water had dried up from the earth.
And Noah removed the covering from the ark
and saw that the surface of the ground was dry.
And by the second month... the earth was dry.)

Passage (4) illustrates three INDIVIDUAL bases. The first (18:10b) indicates a switch of attention from (the conversation between) the LORD and Abraham (v10a) to "Sarah" (describing what she was doing while the conversation was proceeding). The second (v10c) indicates a switch from Sarah to "the tent", which had been "already evoked in the discourse" (Andrews 1985:78). The third (v11) indicates yet another switch, from the tent to "Abraham and Sarah". In all three cases, the basis or topicalized element is also the sentence topic about which a comment is made.

(4) (18:10a) (And He said [to Abraham], "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.")

(10b) &-SARAH listening entrance-of the-tent.

(10c) &-IT behind-him.

(11a) &-ABRAHAM &-SARAH old-ones being-advanced in-days...

(12) &-3SF-laughed Sarah to-herself...

(Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent.
It was behind him.
Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years...
And Sarah laughed to herself...)

Passage (5) illustrates an occasion on which the sentence topic of one clause (Noah; 7:5) becomes the basis (as well as the sentence topic) of the next (v6a). (The passage continues with a switch from Noah to "the flood", which had been alluded to in the speech of v4.)

(5) (7:5) &-3S-did Noah as-all that 3S-commanded-3SO YHWH.

(6a) &-NOAH son-of 600 year.

(6b) &-THE-FLOOD 3S-was waters on the-earth.

(7) &-3S-entered Noah... into the-ark...

(And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him.
Noah was 600 years old
and [when] the floodwaters came on the earth.
And Noah... entered the ark...)

In each of the above passages, the topicalized element is the basis for relating the new sentence to the context. It replaces or reiterates a corresponding element of the context, this being either stated or inferred. Thus, whether the topicalized element replaces or reiterates an element of the context, it is always anaphoric (cf. Werth 1984:61ff).[8]

3 Topicalization and discontinuities in the storyline

As many writers have observed, the storyline or main events of a Hebrew narrative tend to be presented with the verb first in the clause and in the preterite or wayqtl form. Longacre (1989:65), for example, cites with approval the 1910 grammar of Gesenius - Kautzsch - Cowley on this point.

Typically, the relationship between such clauses is "conjunctive-sequential,... the second clause is temporally or logically posterior or consequent to the first" (Lambdin 1971:162). Between the events described in such clauses there is "topic continuity" (Givón 1983:8) and "continuity of situation" (Levinsohn 1987:66). That is to say, the SAME basic storyline is being developed, and no sudden change or discontinuity in the spatio-temporal setting or in the cast of participants is indicated. Rather, modifications are made to the EXISTING scene and cast.[9]

Passage (6) illustrates this continuity in the storyline. On semantic grounds, English translations commonly begin a new paragraph at 2:8a, reflecting the centrality of the garden in the following sentences. At the same time, the verb-initial clauses suggest overall topic continuity throughout the passage. This is reflected in the content of the clauses. The preterite is used throughout, and the events are presented without any stated changes in the temporal setting (contrast the New International Version, which translates 2:8a with a

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pluperfect). A new participant (man; 2:7a) and a prop (garden; 2:8a) are introduced into the existing scene. Similarly, in 2:8b, the man is reintroduced into the existing scene. Even the location of 2:8a (in the east, in Eden) is specified, rather than presented as being in contrast with some other location. (No specific location is indicated for the events of 2:4-7.) Thus, the existing scene and cast are modified, as the passage progresses, and continuity in the storyline is maintained.

(6) (2:7a) &-3S-formed YHWH God the-man dust from the-earth

(7b) &-3S-breathed in-his-nose breath-of life

(7c) &-3S-became the-man into-being living

(8a) &-3S-planted YHWH God garden in-Eden in-east

(8b) &-3S-put there the-man that 3S-formed.

(And the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,
and man became a living being.
And the LORD God planted a garden in the east, in Eden,
and put there the man he had formed.)

When a topicalized element precedes the verb, in contrast, the relationship with the context is "disjunctive" (Lambdin 1971:162); there is a discontinuity in the storyline.
-In (3), the discontinuity is temporal: changes of temporal setting.
-In (4), the discontinuity is "individual"; attention switches from the conversation between Abraham and the Lord to Sarah, from her to the tent, and from the tent to Abraham and Sarah as a couple.
-In (5), the discontinuity is in the flow of the story; the main events of the story are interrupted, in order to introduce two background comments (7:6a,b), each with its own topicalized sentence topic. Once the comments are completed, the main events resume, encoded once more with verb-initial clauses (v7), since there is continuity between the events of v5 and v7. (Cf. also the continuity, in passage (4), between the events of 18:10a and 18:12.)

Example (7) illustrates a passage in which two events occur at different times, yet the temporal expression is not topicalized in the second sentence. By beginning the sentence with a verb, continuity is signalled between the first event and the second (the command and an appropriate response to the command). If the temporal expression had been topicalized, the basis for relating the events would have been by a change of temporal setting, and the command - response relationship would have been obscured. By not topicalizing the temporal expression, continuity between the command and the response is maintained.

(7) (21:12) (God said to him [Abraham], "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you...")

(14) &-3S-rose Abraham IN-MORNING...

(Abraham rose the next morning... and sent [the maidservant] off with the boy) [as Sarah had requested; 21:10].

Thus, when a verb-initial clause is employed to encode an event of a narrative in the Hebrew of Genesis, topic continuity and continuity of situation with the event which preceded it is implied. When the clause begins with a topicalized element, a discontinuity in the storyline is indicated.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that discernment of continuity or discontinuity, in any particular instance, is a pragmatic decision of the WRITER. Frequently, two events could in theory be presented as being in a relationship of continuity or of discontinuity. The constituent order of Hebrew reflects the relationship which the writer actually perceived.

This is illustrated in passage (8). English versions tend to introduce 12:17 with 'but', reflecting perhaps the contrast between Pharaoh's treatment of Abram (v16) and the Lord's treatment of Pharaoh. Conceivably, v17 could have begun with a topicalized reference to Pharaoh (or to YHWH), indicating a switch of attention from Abram (or from Pharaoh). By beginning v17 with a verb, however, the writer has indicated continuity with an earlier event (in this case, v15c; cf. footnote 8).

(8) (12:15c) (And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.)

(16a) &-TO-ABRAM 3S-did-good for-her-sake

(16b) &-3S-had sheep &-oxen &-he-asses...

(17a) &-3S-plagued YHWH Pharaoh with-plagues great...

(He treated Abram well for her sake,
and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys...
But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh...)

4 Topicalization and backgrounding

In his recent work on the Joseph narrative in Genesis, Longacre (1989:80f) maintains that sentences whose verb is in the perfect or qtl form and which begin with a noun present "backgrounded actions". Bailey (forthcoming, sect. 3.6) disputes this claim at length, and cites a variety of apparent counter-examples. I therefore only outline Bailey's argument here.

If a Hebrew clause begins with a verb, the verb may be in the preterite or the "perfect" (among others).[10] Longacre argues that clauses with a preterite present the main events of a narrative, whereas those with a "perfect" describe backgrounded actions (ibid). Bailey accepts this position.

When a clause does NOT begin with a verb, however, the PRETERITE CANNOT OCCUR. Consequently, the foreground versus background distinction based on the use of the preterite versus the "perfect" is potentially neutralized. In Bailey's opinion, this neutralization actually occurs, and he cites as confirmation a number of passages which involve preverbal elements fronted for either focus or topicalization. In such passages, some clauses with preverbal elements and the perfect appear not to be presenting backgrounded information.

Passage (9) illustrates Bailey's claim. Longacre's analysis predicts that both 4:4a and 4:5a present backgrounded actions, since the perfect is used. In contrast, v3b and v4b present foreground actions, since they are presented with the preterite.

Such an analysis appears to be counter-intuitive. The clauses with topicalized phrases are compared and contrasted with those that precede them, and appear to be just as important as them. It does not seem reasonable to consider them to be backgrounded with respect to those with which they contrast.

(9) (4:3b) &-3S-brought Cain from-fruit-of the-earth offering to-YHWH

(4a) &-ABEL 3S-brought also he from-firstborn-of his-flock...

(4b) &-3S-accepted YHWH to-Abel &-to-his-offering

(5a) &-TO CAIN &-TO-HIS OFFERING not 3S-accepted.

(And Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.
And Abel brought... portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.
And the LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,
but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.)

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The NATURE of topicalization explains why a majority of clauses with preverbal elements are backgrounded. Because topicalization indicates discontinuity, many clauses with preverbal elements occur at the beginning of "new narrative units" (Fox 1987:168; Longacre's "episodes"). For example, cf. the topicalized expressions presenting new temporal settings in passage (3). Consequently, such clauses may naturally be viewed as presenting actions of a preliminary, backgrounded nature. Similarly, because background comments represent a break or discontinuity in the storyline, they typically begin with a topicalized sentence topic, as passages (4) and (5) have shown.

It does not follow, however, that ALL clauses which begin with a topicalized element are backgrounded. In other words, topicalization is not per se a backgrounding device.[11]

I conclude, therefore, that topicalized clauses in the perfect in Hebrew cannot be allocated to a single band in Longacre's verbal rank scheme for narrative discourse. Until their context is examined, it is not possible to know whether such clauses present storyline events (Band 1) or background activities (Band 2).[12]

5 Marked instances of topicalization

In sect. 3 I argued that the topicalization of an element indicates a discontinuity of some sort in the storyline. I now consider passages in which NO discontinuity is evident, yet topicalization occurs.

Sperber & Wilson claim that, when an apparently inappropriate construction is used, the writer "must have expected to achieve some additional contextual effects not obtainable" from using the equivalent unmarked construction (1986:196). Thus, when topicalization is found in an apparently inappropriate context (viz. in the absence of a discontinuity), the purpose will be to achieve additional effects. In the case of Hebrew, I argue that the intended effect of such 'redundant' topicalization is highlighting.

Example (10) is representative of a number of passages which Bailey considers to occur "at narrative high points" (forthcoming, sect. 3.6.3; Longacre's discourse "peak"; 1989:286). In this passage (and in the others he cites), topicalization initially is found in connection with a preliminary event which is presented without the conjunction waw (44:3a; itself an unusual feature in the context of narrative events). Topicalization occurs also in connection with the key event to which the earlier event was leading (v4c) plus any further preliminary events that intervene (vv3b,4a).

What is significant about these clauses is that one or more of the topicalizations is not warranted on the ground of discontinuity. For example, if v3a is interpreted as a replacement temporal basis, as in passage (3), then topicalization of the reference to the individuals in v3b is not warranted as well.

(10) (44:2) (And he [Joseph's steward] did as Joseph said.)

(3a) THE-MORNING 3S-dawned* [*or "light"]

(3b) &-THE-MEN 3P-were-sent they &-their-donkeys

(4a) THEY 3P-went-from the-city

(4b) Not 3P-went-far

(4c) &-JOSEPH 3S-said to-that over his-house...

(Morning dawned,
and the men were sent on their way with their donkeys.
They had not gone far from the city
and [when] Joseph said to his steward, "Go after those men...")

(Cf. also 19:23-25; 38:25.)

It thus appears that, as Bailey's "narrative high point" label implies, such marked instances of topicalization occur to contribute to the effect of HIGHLIGHTING a key event which is to follow.

In a few passages, an ISOLATED reference to a minor participant or prop is topicalized, even though no discontinuity in the storyline is discernable. Example (11) is representative of such passages. Although topicalization occurs in 19:6b, there appears to be no discontinuity between the events of v6a and v6b.[13]

The motivation for such 'redundant' topicalization appears again to be that of highlighting the event which immediately follows (in this case, Lot's response of vv7f to the men's demand of vv4f that he bring out his visitors). Verse 6b may thus be viewed as a 'foil', setting off the more significant event which immediately follows it.

(11) (19:4f) (Before they had gone to bed, all the men of the city... surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them.")

(6a) &-3S-went to-them Lot to-the-outside

(6b) &-THE-DOOR 3S-shut after-him

(7) &-3S-said...

(And Lot went outside to meet them
and shut the door behind him
and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing!
Look, I have two daughters... Let me bring them out to
you...")

(Cf. also 19:10d.)

In summary, then, when verb-initial clauses are used in Hebrew, there is continuity in the storyline between the events described in such clauses and previous events of the story. Topicalization typically is used to indicate discontinuities in the storyline, but does not in itself indicate that the events described in such clauses are backgrounded. When topicalization is used but no discontinuity is evident, the writer intends to achieve additional effects. In the case of Hebrew, the effect of such 'redundant' topicalization is that of highlighting a key event which is to follow.

NOTES

1. This paper generally conforms to the analysis of N. Bailey (forthcoming), who argues that all preverbal elements in independent clauses in the narrative of Genesis are either topicalized or focused.

2. The examples cited are all from Genesis, and reflect the order of elements in Hebrew. The free translation generally follows the New International Version, but is modified in places, to more closely reflect the Hebrew. In (3) to (11), topicalized elements are in upper case (in (7), it is the potential basis which is in upper case).

ABBREVIATIONS used: 3P/3S: 3rd. person plural/singular; F: feminine; O: object.

3. Cf. below on the functional status of "in the second month".

4. In oral speech, such sentences are readily distinguished from those with topic - comment articulation, because of the distinctive position and type of stress. Werth (1984) suggests ways in which such sentences may be recognized in written material, as well.

5. Halliday and Beneš both call the sentence topic the "theme", and the comment the "rheme".

6. The following table compares the terms employed by Beneš and Foley & Van Valin (1984:124) to refer to what in this article I call 'topicalized element' and 'sentence topic':

	topicalized element	sentence topic
Beneš	basis	theme
Foley & Van Valin	topic	pivot

7. The clearest example of a spatial basis is found in 18:7. Attention switches from events in the tent to those with the herd.

(18:6) &-3S-hurried Abraham to-the-tent to Sarah &-3S-said, "Quick!..."

(7) &-TO THE-HERD 3S-ran Abraham & 3S-selected calf...
(And Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick!..."
And he ran to the herd and selected a... calf...)

8. In Werth's terms, switch or replacement is a "negative anaphoric operation"; reiteration is a "positive anaphoric operation" (ibid.).

Sentences at the beginning of discourses typically open with a topicalized element. Such bases are anaphoric in the sense that they replace a corresponding element of the context in which the discourse was uttered or written. For instance, the topicalized temporal expression which opens Genesis ("in-beginning"; 1:1) replaces the time of composition of the book by the temporal setting for the story.

9. Bailey (forthcoming, sect. 4) points out that topic continuity is not always with the events described in the immediately preceding sentence or passage. He cites 4:25, which reintroduces Adam and his wife (last mentioned in 4:2), after incidents involving Abel, Cain and Lamech. Concerning the use of a verb-initial clause in 4:25a, Bailey comments, "Here, by means of wayqtl, continuity of the main narrative is emphasized".

10. In fact, it is very unusual for what Longacre calls the "perfect" to occur verb-initial. Dr. Randell Buth (personal conversation) questions, on historical grounds, whether such forms should be identified with the "perfect" which follows a fronted element.

11. This would seem to be confirmed from Koine Greek, another language in which verb-initial clauses suggest overall topic continuity and bases are topicalized. In Greek, following a preverbal element, the distinction between preterite (aorist) and perfect is not neutralized. Consequently, the preterite is commonly used in topicalized clauses in which one clause is compared and contrasted with another, and the second clause presents a main event of the story. (Cf. Levinsohn 1987:10ff,162ff for examples.)

12. Longacre's verbal rank scheme for Hebrew appears to reflect the interaction of a number of parameters, of which topicalization is but one. Longacre himself (forthcoming, MS p.100f) cites E.A. Gutt who "lays out four parameters which he considers to be relevant to the ranking of verbs in Silti narrative" (an Ethio-Semitic language). Since

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these parameters (tense, verb status, semantic verb types, mood) are independent of each other, it is unlikely that a single ranking of verbs to reflect "degrees of departure from the storyline" (Longacre 1989:82, footnote 6) is possible for Silti (or Hebrew) narratives.

13. Cf. Levinsohn forthcoming on the topicalization of props and minor participants in Bahasa Malaysia, when there is no discontinuity to warrant topicalization. In that article I argued that the element topicalized was a "temporary topic" whose domain extended over only one sentence. Typically, sentences containing such 'redundant' topicalization are followed immediately by the description of key events. In other words, marked topicalization in Bahasa Malaysia, as in Hebrew, has the effect of highlighting a key event to follow; the event so topicalized may usefully be viewed as a 'foil' which sets off the immediately following event.

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